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# ASBURY PARK CONFERENCE

JUNE 23-27, 1919

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS: THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION AT THE CROSSROADS

BY WILLIAM WARNER BISHOP, *Librarian, University of Michigan*

It is inevitable that we should recall tonight the amazing change in world conditions from the situation at the time of our last annual conference. Then the darkest days of the great war had indeed passed, though none of us could know for a certainty that the tide of German attack pressing on toward Paris had truly ebbed. The courageous and of a truth supremely daring offensive already launched by Marshal Foch in mid-June had just begun to put hope into the hearts of the allied peoples, stunned by the constantly widening and steadily renewed German offensives of the spring of 1918. The great days of Chateau-Thierry and the second Marne were those on which we met at Saratoga—anxious days on which our minds continually reverted to France and refused to concentrate even on problems of the library war service. We were more eager for the latest newspaper than for advice, inspiration, discussion on themes ordinarily absorbing to us. We adjourned just as the Germans were definitely driven across the Marne for the second time. And we adjourned confident (though no man ventured to say what he thought) that July of the next year would see us still struggling to end the business and to finish our share of the supreme task of western civilization—the final defeat of Germany and her allies! Indeed, so fearful were we, and rightly, that sterner sacrifices would be demanded of us, that we passed a resolution empowering our Executive Board to postpone this annual meeting, if the public emergency should be such that conventions and conferences would prove undesirable.

How different the national and international atmosphere today! The war won

in November—our men returning as rapidly as they were ferried across the ocean—industry and agriculture resuming their wonted courses—problems of details of readjustment agitating nations and individuals—the Peace Congress almost over—a league of nations almost an actuality—disarmament going on the world over—and stricken humanity endeavoring to bind up its wounds and to console its broken-hearted. The note of our meeting today is necessarily one of triumph and jubilation. We are not forgetful of the problems of peace, many of them as ugly as those of war (or so they seem to our still taut nerves). But after all *the war* is behind us. We are living through a period of rapid change, and our foes, if foes there be, are at least likely to be those of our own household. We doubtless have enormously difficult days ahead of us, but happily our own land has been spared the sorrows that have afflicted our noble French and Belgian allies, and we are materially and morally less stricken by war, less worn and weary, more able to face the future with smiling confidence, resting assured that the American spirit which brought us through war will still carry us on to a larger life and a greater service in peace.

And so we meet again after a year to take up with renewed zest and energy those problems of our work which we are accustomed to attack in our annual gatherings. And yet we are none of us quite the same as we were in 1917 or 1916. Our work, while still "the trivial round and common task," is not done—can not be done—in exactly the same spirit as of old. We have dreamed dreams and seen visions, and we are turning to the future

of our own library service with a profound conviction that it is service—public service of the highest type. To that end we are met, to consider our war service and to render an account of our stewardship in that branch of our labors; to transact our routine business and to hear and discuss reports of our committees; but chiefly to survey our own capacities, and to talk over the possibilities of the near future. This is a forward-looking conference. No other could be held by progressive Americans in this year of grace 1919.

In planning the papers for this series of meetings your Program Committee has had in mind just three purposes. First, we have felt that we should emphasize and make of practical import our committee reports. Too frequently these have been perfunctory and have received but little discussion. Such of the reports as are necessarily of special interest to smaller groups of our membership are to be presented this year for discussion to certain of the section meetings, an innovation which will, we trust, result in animated discussion of a sort frequently impossible in our general sessions. Other reports, being on topics of more general interest and importance, will come up for discussion in our second general session. So far as possible these reports have been printed in advance, and, instead of being read in full, will be presented in summary only, in order to leave time for discussion. They represent much work on the part of the committees, and I bespeak for them your interest and your comment.

The most important—certainly the most interesting report—is likely to be that of the War Service Committee, which is now before you in printed form. Naturally the war service looms large in our eyes, and we have devoted to it no small share of our general program. One of the natural consequences of that service—or at least what we librarians feel should be one of its results—is the establishment of similar service on a permanent basis for the Army and Navy. We

are most fortunate in the presence of very distinguished representatives of both branches of the service to speak upon this topic.

Our second theme is a statement of certain present day conditions in our American libraries. We should have been glad to devote the major part of our time to this purpose of setting forth our conditions and resources. A few sample topics of necessity have to suffice us. But we present a preliminary report on plans for a complete survey, plans to which I shall revert later.

Finally we look to the immediate future. Here again we can offer but certain phases of a complete forecast. But we have tried, as I said a moment since, to make this a forward-looking meeting, even if necessarily our topics are but a selection from many. Things historical—save of our war service—things theoretical, things technical, we have tried for this occasion at least to avoid.

It has seemed to me peculiarly fitting that the president of the Association should at this time review the work of this body and perhaps endeavor to show certain possibilities which have revealed themselves to him in the course of his term of office. I do not apologize for speaking to the American Library Association *about* the American Library Association. Not that I wish to dogmatize or to appear to have any peculiar message to impart. It does seem, however, that we may well spare the time and strength to confer a little about our own affairs and our means of doing business collectively, in the interests of librarianship and of American libraries.

At the Niagara Falls Conference in 1903, Mr. J. N. Larned, then retired from active public service though by no means from active work, spoke very convincingly of the life of this Association as a body. He said to a little group of younger people, what he later repeated on the platform before the Association as a whole, that coming back after an interval of several years he was conscious of the fact that the

American Library Association had a life, an organism, apart from the individuals who composed it. "I feel it," said he, "it is almost palpable; it exists, it influences you and me. We can not escape it, it forms us, and yet we form it." How true these words were the experience of fifteen years has proved again and again. The Association has a vigor, a power, an influence of which we are perhaps but dimly conscious. That power and influence has worked hitherto chiefly on professional librarians. It has molded their thoughts and guided their actions. It has stimulated their ideals and has kept up their standards. It has worked largely as a sort of professional public opinion, functioning more or less well as circumstances have permitted. The great shock of war has, however, released an enormous latent energy in our Association and in our calling outside its ranks, for not all strong librarians are members of our body. We are conscious today of greater possibilities in library work and in the concerted work of librarians than we ever sensed in days gone by. Much of this feeling is naturally the result of the war service. It is in every way proper, then, to inquire how far we have measured up to the opportunities the war has thrust upon us. And further, what are the next steps?

To a thoughtful person it was a very significant thing that the United States Government through the Commission on Training Camp Activities applied to this Association to render service along strictly professional lines. It asked us as librarians to contribute our professional services, just as it asked the doctors and the chemists to serve as doctors and chemists. That such a thing was possible shows that the value and need of the librarian's work in massing, arranging, and interpreting books had at last gained the recognition which it deserves. No single fact in connection with our war service has more significance for us as we face the problems of peace than this recognition. Our war service was sought and was performed on the ground of our special fit-

ness to give it. The history of the library war service has been one of steady gain in this sort of recognition, for the discernment of certain farseeing men in Washington did not mean that their judgment must necessarily be final and instantly accepted. Nay, it was their initial wisdom which made possible the gradual winning by the librarians of a professional status in the minds of thousands of commanding officers, soldiers, sailors, marines. I believe it is now true that even the scornful and the doubting among the military have seen that books plus librarian are very different from books alone. And it has been no small gain for us as a profession that scores of our folk, mostly our younger members, have had to win their way to this esteem under novel and difficult circumstances. They have had to make good in most cases with very little preparation of the way by others. How hard that task was, and how strenuous and unremitting the labor involved in setting up a new work amid adverse conditions, few who were not themselves engaged in it can understand. Long hours, obstacles innumerable, delays, red tape, failure of books and of supplies, cold, rain, even lack of sleep, were the lot of many of our pioneers in the war service. The general testimony is, however, most gratifying. They did make good. The exceptions were few enough to "prove the rule." And as I look about me and see these men and women who have worn and are wearing our uniform, these younger folk who have toiled incessantly and with good spirit and good humor at manifold and difficult tasks, I am moved to no small pride and thankfulness. In the name of the American Library Association I salute you all, present and absent! We who could not go acknowledge to the full your sacrifice, your devotion, your skill, your energy. We share in the honor reflected on our calling by your labors. The name *librarian* henceforth means something to millions of men because of your work.

And to those also who planned and toiled to carry out this war service are

due the hearty thanks of the American Library Association, and them also I salute in your name. From the very first days of our entrance into the war until now—two full years—certain officers and committee members of this body have been unsparing in their devotion of strength, time, and effort to the library war service. They have worked to raise money and books, have sacrificed time and strength to attend committee meetings, have neglected their own work to do this patriotic service, and have given themselves generously in your behalf, in the name of the American Library Association. You know them all, and it would be easier, less invidious perhaps, to mention no names. But while recognizing that all of them have been devotion itself, I cannot refrain from stating publicly the obligations which we owe to a certain few. There is our secretary, Mr. George B. Utley, who has served as executive secretary of the War Service Committee, who has known no limit of hours for two years, and who has carried the greatly increased burden of his regular work in addition to all this war work. There is the chairman of the War Finance Committee, Dr. Frank P. Hill, to whose untiring and truly heroic efforts we owe the raising of the first war service fund of eighteen hundred thousand dollars, and the second fund of three and a half million. There is the chairman of the War Service Committee, Mr. J. I. Wyer, Jr., who has spent his time and strength, I fear too lavishly, on the war service and on the work of the Committee of Eleven in charge of the United War Work Campaign Fund. No one who has not been a part of that work can realize the burden he has carried, and the way he has carried it. There is the associate general director of the war service, Mr. Carl H. Milam, to whom sixteen hours a day of the hardest kind of work seem a pleasing measure, and who has carried successfully administrative burdens which would have laid most of us on the shelf. And finally, there is the general director of the War Service, Dr. Herbert Putnam, of

whom I can say no more than that we all marvel at his capacity for work, his administrative skill, his foresight and his penetration. Volunteer work, all of it! Money does not, cannot, pay for the sort of labor these men and their colleagues—for I speak of them all equally with these I have ventured to name—have lavished on *our* contribution to America in her hour of need. It is *our* part not only to recognize their labors, but to carry on their work, to carry its spirit back to our offices and desks, into our reading-rooms and stacks. We librarians are bound to be and do more because of what these our colleagues have been and have done.

We are bound as an Association to do more—not as much or less—than we did before this emergency, this national crisis, showed us our power to do. This obligation is very real and vital and comes home to all of us. Just because the officers of the Association feel it so keenly, I have ventured to make it the topic for this address which our custom requires of each retiring president. But first in any consideration of our possible future activities there necessarily comes the question, "What sort of machinery do we have with which to work?" May we descend from thoughts of our accomplishments, and from our aspirations for future tasks to very practical considerations of our form of organization?

Few things are more tiresome, especially in annual conferences, than "tinkering" with constitutions, as all who recall certain of our meetings will doubtless agree. I must almost apologize for taking these matters up here and now. But I must also in honesty say that my experience as your president shows that our organic law is very far from making for smooth and rapid achievement. We really have a most clumsy organization, particularly in view of the fact that we live all over the United States and Canada, and that actual meetings of committees and boards are most expensive of time and money. Let me mention only a few of the obstacles and anomalies resulting from our constitution.

We expressly, and most wisely, place the responsibility for the business of the Association in the intervals between meetings on the Executive Board. One of the fundamental functions of such a board is the making up of the budget which governs practically all expenditure and hence determines the extent and range of the Association's activities. But the budget of this Association is prepared for the Executive Board's adoption by the Finance Committee, only one of whose three members, by our constitution, is a member of the Executive Board. This is not said in criticism of the work of the Finance Committee, but of the system, and of the possibilities of friction and delay which are involved. We have also a constitutional provision allowing mail votes of the Executive Board; an absolute necessity, since we now choose that board largely for geographical reasons, that all parts of our territory may be represented. And as a result meetings of the board can be held but seldom, generally only twice or thrice a year. Hence the provision for voting by mail. But as matters now stand, a single disapproving vote (when conducted by mail) negatives absolutely any proposal until it can be taken up and acted on at a meeting. Now it is of course difficult to secure absolute unanimity of opinion on important matters of business, and this provision results in very serious delays and failures.

We confide our publishing activities—one of our chief functions, and one destined to an increasing importance,—to the Publishing Board, which is by the constitution so devised that but one member of the Executive Board serves on it, and which contains no other officer of the Association. The Publishing Board has done fine work, and deserves the thanks of this body. But it is not necessarily responsive to the policies of the Executive Board or of the Association, and in fact it may perfectly well be out of harmony with both. Again, I repeat, the form of organization is not one which works smoothly and

quickly; again without criticism of individuals.

The treasurer of the Association does not sit on either the Finance Committee or the Executive Board. His function under our constitution seems merely clerical, and it is no small tribute to Mr. Roden's patience and loyalty that he has been willing to serve us these many years without greater recognition and without the power to put his business experience in office at the disposal of the Association. While recognizing the public spirit and fidelity with which he and the members of the Finance Committee and of the Publishing Board have done the Association's work, it appears strangely anomalous that in these days of efficiency systems our various bodies should be so disjointed. In the direction of smooth and rapid functioning I suggest that a simple scheme of things in which our Executive Board should serve virtually as a Board of Directors performing the work of the Association through committees of its own body would prove a signal advantage. In my judgment, our organization is far too complex. It should be simplified and made more efficient by following the example of business corporations. If we but detach ourselves from the circumstances which have produced our present form of organization and view it from the standpoint of an efficiency engineer, we can see at once that it would benefit greatly by centralizing responsibility and authority. Some such process is a necessity, I believe, if we are to meet the demands which are pressing upon us.

I therefore urge that you consider this matter very carefully at the business sessions, for I am convinced that until the constitution of this Association permits concentration of authority and rapidity of action we shall never perform the work we ought to do. This conviction is the direct result of my observation in the past year when so many important matters have been before the officers of the Association. I know it is shared by many

thoughtful persons, and I trust you will give it your attention.

What are these demands of which I have just spoken? The chief of them all comes from ourselves. We have seen the splendid spirit with which our library folk have responded to the call for their services in a time of national peril. We have felt both pride and satisfaction in the way the American Library Association has been doing big things in a big way. On every hand I hear librarians saying, "We *must* not lose this spirit—this momentum. We must keep it for our peace time work. We need it. There must be no slackening, no slump, no dropping back, no disobedience to the vision." Do you not meet this sort of feeling and of talk? I do, wherever I go. Sometimes it takes one form, sometimes another, but it is there, constantly and always, this determination not to drop back into mere routine, not to let slip this sense of power. Can we, dare we, ignore this call to continuing service, service as a body, not merely as individuals. Whatever else we do here in this week, we must not, I feel—and I am sure you all agree with me—we *must* not assume that with the war our collective responsibility ends, and we may now go back to 1917 and take up the old threads where we left off.

So strongly has this feeling been in the hearts of the officers of the Association that they felt confident that you would wish, would decide, would plan to go on to further corporate work in peace, work for the benefit of all libraries, and of communities having no libraries. To this end a library survey of the entire country was authorized by the Executive Board in January and entrusted to a Committee of Five on Library Service. This committee was charged with the duty of setting down the actual conditions of American libraries today, their incomes, their property, their staffs, their salaries, their methods, their practice. It is to report here on its plans. How great is the need for some such statement of conditions, practice and standards, I can testify from repeated experiences

during the past four months. "Can't you give us some *definite* statement of what it would cost to run a college library in the right way?" That was the demand the Ohio College Association made on me last April. "What should we as trustees expect our librarian to do?" has been asked of me a dozen times in the last year. "Is our library doing well for its income?" is a fair question for any citizen, whether a trustee or not. Some norm by which we can measure ourselves, some statement of practice, of salaries, of methods, of training, which trustees and librarians can set before them as a goal, or a point of departure, this is what the Committee of Five will try to draw up. To do it properly will be most costly, but then, so will any other piece of good work. If we are to go forward, we must first know where we stand. This we hope the Service Committee of Five will tell us, and I appeal to you all to second their efforts in your most hearty manner.

One of the amazing experiences of the library service for soldiers and sailors has been the repeated calls for similar service to civilians. The money contributed for war work has been used solely for war work, but it has been heart-breaking to refuse the many appeals for help—help which we could give, had we but the means. At the Council meeting, which is open to all members, some of these kinds of work will be brought out by persons who have knowledge of them. But let me say in advance that we could keep an active force at work at headquarters doing perfectly legitimate library work not now being done by established agencies, had we the means. There is the continuing service to the Army and Navy, which we hope will be taken over by the Government; service to the merchant marine, now so sadly neglected, and so appealing in its demand; service to lighthouses and lightships, and to the coast guard; information and inspection service for communities in real need of expert advice, particularly in states having no library commissions; service to the blind, which is so

costly and which so few local libraries are able to render effectively; service in organizing interlibrary loans, and thus making the resources of the whole country serve research; service in coöperative buying, in which we ought to bring to play for the benefit of us all the experience of buying for the war work; service in publicity which will recognize that the best publicity is service; service to practical bibliography, unlocking the treasures too frequently concealed in card catalogs; service in preparing all manner of union lists, to avoid much duplication of rare sets, and much bidding against one another; service in aid of special library training; service—but I will stop; why catalog the various coöperative enterprises and public benefits in which we are eager to engage? The work is here and ready to our hands. The harvest needs but the reapers.

But, says doubting Thomas—for he is here, many of him—where is the money coming from to do all these fine things? Where, I ask, did the millions of books come from? What was the source of the millions on millions of magazines? Who gave us nearly five million dollars for our war work? Who is buying doughnuts for dollars as I write these words? The American people only have to be convinced that we have a good thing, to give us all the money we need. If we can't convince them, then we won't get it. But we should, I am sure, have a friend in every man in both services who saw our bookplate on a book he read. If we can believe the tales we hear and the letters that come in, the boys believe in us and in our work. If, as I believe, we have *their* good-will, the rest is easy. The money will come, but not without asking, if also not for the asking. It will be your task at this conference, my fellow members, to decide whether you wish to make the venture, to ask for the money, to decide whether you believe enough in your work

to try to make the American people believe in it.

A word in conclusion. The emergency work of the past two years has been done by a happy combination of our experienced leaders and our younger men and women. If the American Library Association is to go forward, whether on the plans before us today or on any others, it matters not which; if the American Library Association is to go forward, it must be by the efforts of the younger generation. I see before me a few veterans who have been with the Association since its first meetings. We listened last year at Albany to him who was long its chief servant and its chief inspiration, Melvil Dewey. But, ladies and gentlemen, his words, prophetic as they were, marked the end of an epoch. The men of 1876 are almost all gone. The men who came into the work in the nineties are getting old. The war has shown the powers of those men and women who have come to us in the last two decades. To them belong the tasks of the near future. If ever we feared lest the men who should succeed Dewey and Winsor, Larned and Poole and Cutter, Fletcher and Brett, and our other pioneers should set a lower mark than theirs, that doubt has been dissolved by the last two years. Those who come after our pioneers are more than equal to the task. Together, if they will bear with the slower wits and less active bodies of us older men and women, we can carry the American Library Association on to greater and nobler service.

For very plainly we stand at the crossroads. Our war service is all but done. Six months will see the end of it. We can of course go lumbering on, doing fairly well, as of old, our accustomed tasks. Or we can strike out into new fields, into ways of practical library service that are clearly open. I am confident of your choice, and more confident that we can not go back. We shall, I am sure, make 1919 memorable as the year of the great decision.